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## Chapter 9

### PSALMS, PATRIOTISM AND PROPAGANDA: A FAVOURITE BOOK IN WARTIME BIBLICAL SCHOLARSHIP

Andrew Mein

The Psalms might almost have been waiting for such an hour: they needed the leaping up of the fires through the crust of life to make them clear. Some of their cries had been only dull echoes of a receding past. ‘Men do not do such things,’ we had said. Suddenly the conditions were returned: we were in the presence of enemies, the peoples imagined vain things; the heathen were come into the divine inheritance; the honour of God was threatened. Psalm upon psalm smote us with a strangely modern power. The motions of doubt and of elation, of anger, and even hatred, were there perfectly expressed. We went to the deeps, and these strange songs followed us; we rose to the heavens, and they were there.

‘The Bible in War-Time: New Light in Old Words’  
(*The Times*, 19 August 1916)

#### *Introduction*

As Europe found itself in grip of war from 1914 to 1918, many biblical scholars, like academics across the disciplines, wanted to make a contribution. The war offered a test of the relevance of both the material they taught and studied, and the methods they employed in research and writing. In this context, they often turned to the book of Psalms, which was without doubt the best known and loved of the books of the Old Testament. That familiarity, together with the perceived timelessness of its themes, made it feel especially relevant. And biblical scholars were well aware of its popularity. Rudolf Kittel (1853–1929), in his 1916 volume *Das Alte Testament und unser Krieg*, recounts how he received a letter from a student volunteer, in which the student reports that in the field the book of Psalms has become ‘an especially dear friend’.<sup>1</sup> In another letter, this time from a chaplain,

1. Rudolf Kittel, *Das Alte Testament und unser Krieg* (Leipzig: Dörffling & Franke, 1916), 27. For a more thorough study of Kittel and the war, see the essay in this volume by Lukas

he read how the words of protection in Psalms 91 and 27 are the most helpful preparation for troops about to face battle and danger. On the other side, J. E. McFadyen (1870–1933), professor of Old Testament at the United Free College in Glasgow, emphasized the continuity of both human and religious experience between our world and that of the psalms: ‘It was out of the depths of a sorrow as keen as ours that the Psalmists cried to God and the deep of our experience answers to the deep of theirs.’<sup>2</sup> The most extravagant claim probably came from Otto Eissfeldt (1887–1973), in his 1915 study *Krieg und Bibel*: ‘No other book of the Bible has at present influenced the religious proclamation of this time of war like the Psalms.’<sup>3</sup>

It is therefore no surprise that the psalms feature prominently in the wartime literature produced by biblical scholars. In what follows, I shall examine the use made of the psalms in publications by scholars on both sides of the conflict, with a focus on Germany and Britain. What themes and texts do they draw on, and how do they find them especially helpful or problematic? How do scholars’ critical assumptions about the text shape their understanding of its relevance to the current context? How far do the results of their reflection on the Bible mirror or contradict the typical themes of the propaganda of the time?

### *The Psalms and the Nation*

The national and often martial focus of the Old Testament made it seem more relevant than the New to the crisis of a world war, and in this situation interpreters were more than willing to draw implicit or explicit connections between God’s chosen people Israel and their own nation. Both Britain and Germany offer examples of a strong Protestant nationalism in which such connections were well rooted, although there are some different emphases in the ways scholars in the two different contexts used the story of Israel to illuminate their respective national crises.

An emphasis on the nation of Israel was especially strong on the part of German biblical scholars, and one psalm plays a fundamental role: Psalm 46, as seen through the prism of Luther’s paraphrase ‘Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott’. Over the course of the nineteenth century, this hymn had acquired the character of nationalist anthem, and it was regularly used by German soldiers at the beginning of the First World War as a marching song. Almost without exception, German writers see this as evidence for the power of the psalms to express and even define the

Bormann. Kittel was professor of Old Testament at Leipzig and later became rector of the University. Translations of German texts are my own, unless noted otherwise.

2. John E. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter and the Present Distress’, *ExpTim* 28, no. 6–8 (1917): 245–49, 305–7, 373–77 (245).

3. Otto Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1915), 61. Eissfeldt was at that time a pastor and *Privatdozent* in Berlin.

national mood. Thus the veteran Assyriologist Friedrich Delitzsch (1850–1922), in his December 1914 lecture ‘Psalmworte für die Gegenwart’, makes much of it:

The song of our Luther, that has become the war song of our people, which sounded out through the streets of the conquered fortress from the lips of our victorious warriors entering Antwerp – that song has taken its *leitmotif* from the 46th Psalm: ‘Yahweh is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.’<sup>4</sup>

Rudolf Kittel chimes in, claiming that Luther’s great creation, inspired by psalmic poetry, ‘has been transformed more and more from a Reformation song of war and protection against papacy and Roman church into a hymn of confidence and victory for all Germans.’<sup>5</sup> Not only Christian scholars make this move. The Essen rabbi Salomon Samuel (1867–1942), in his lectures collected under the title *Bibel und Heldentum*, harks back to the ‘psalm-singing legions’ of the war of 1870–1871 as evidence of the Bible’s immense value in time of war and goes on to claim that Israel’s Bible breathes a warlike spirit that can strengthen a specifically German heroism.<sup>6</sup> In this context, the psalms themselves become a kind of German ‘national poetry’, and another Jewish writer, Adolf Eckstein, rabbi in Bamberg, reflects on this. For Eckstein, the Old Testament provides the classic example of a world where national and religious consciousness is intertwined, and it is this national-religious character that comes to the fore in the heroic poetry of the Bible. What is more, he claims, it is the Bible’s ‘war psalms’ that inspired nationalist poets of the early nineteenth century like Theodor Körner to produce the poetry of *Sturm und Drang* which, ‘like a festival morning bell awoke the old German spirit of war from its slumber.’<sup>7</sup> And the psalms in turn remind Eckstein of their traditional author, the warrior king David, whom he describes in self-consciously modern language as the ‘original father of militarism.’<sup>8</sup> The idea of Hebrew poetry as ‘national poetry’ had a long pedigree in the German tradition going back to Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803).<sup>9</sup> Alfred Bertholet (1868–1951), Old

4. Friedrich Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte für die Gegenwart’, in *Deutsche Reden in schwerer Zeit*, vol. 2, ed. Zentralstelle für Volkswohlfahrt/Verein für volkstümliche Kurse von Berliner Hochschullehrern (Berlin: C. Heymans, 1915), 63–87.

5. Kittel, *Das Alte Testament*, 22. Kittel’s words describe remarkably well the focus of Michael Fischer, *Religion, Nation, Krieg: Der Lutherchoral ‘Ein Feste Burg ist unser Gott’ zwischen Befreiungskriegen und Erstem Weltkrieg*, *Populäre Kultur Und Musik* 11 (Münster: Waxmann, 2014). For Fischer, this lengthy process of transformation into an anthem of nationalism and militarism reaches its peak during 1914–1918.

6. Salomon Samuel, *Bibel und Heldentum: Fünf Kriegsvorlesungen gehalten in den akademischen Kurzen zu Essen im Wintersemester 1914/15* (Berlin: Louis Lamm, 1915), 8.

7. Adolf Eckstein, *Der Völkerkrieg und das Alte Testament* (Nürnberg: Kommissions-Verlag Korn, 1915), 11.

8. *Ibid.*, 13.

9. Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 168–76.

Testament professor at Göttingen, makes explicit reference to Herder's idea of the enduring patriotism of the Jewish people when he invokes Psalm 137's heartfelt cry: 'If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget, let my tongue cleave to my palate if I do not think of you!'<sup>10</sup>

Some psalms speak very obviously with a communal, national voice, and in the period the view was common among scholars that the 'I' of the psalms should often be read in a collective sense as the voice of the whole Israelite community.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, some of the most warlike individual psalms are of course the royal psalms, in which the king is the representative of the people. Hermann Gunkel (1862–1932) includes relatively little psalmic material in his account of biblical heroism *Israelitisches Heldentum*, but he does draw attention to the royal psalms, especially 20 and 21, with their images of the victorious warrior king as a model of righteous heroism for others to emulate. Gunkel also notes the fact that even the Hebrew language teaches that war is a divine judgement, since the Hebrew words *tsaddiq* and *tsedeq/tsedaqah* carry not only the sense of 'righteous' and 'righteousness', but also that of 'salvation' and 'victory'. The royal psalms exemplify the pious and righteous king, who fights for the truth in opposition to wicked enemies.<sup>12</sup>

In these appropriations of the Psalter, the working assumption is normally that Germany and her allies occupy the position of righteous and victorious Israel. Otto Eissfeldt introduces his discussion of the psalms with the claim:

The most beautiful witnesses of [the Israelite] belief in victory based on inner righteousness are to be found in the psalms. It cuts across a wide range of different genres, from laments to thanksgivings, and it proved a strong inspiration to the people.<sup>13</sup>

The German people had been especially drawn to the psalms' confidence in victory during the conflict. Eissfeldt and his colleagues are not so much making the quasi-theological claim that Germany is some kind of new or continuing Israel, as drawing on what they see as close parallels between the historical situations of the two nations.

10. Alfred Bertholet, *Altes Testament und Kriegsfrömmigkeit: Ein Vortrag* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1917), 35–36.

11. Gillingham notes the work of Smend (1888), Wellhausen (1898), Cheyne (1904), and Briggs (1906–1907). The tide of scholarship was beginning to turn with the work of Gunkel and Balla, but in 1914, the communal view was still common. See Susan E. Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 197–98.

12. Hermann Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum und Kriegsfrömmigkeit im Alten Testament* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1916), 30–31. For a more detailed discussion of this booklet (and its disappearance from later scholarly accounts of Israelite war), see Gordon Mitchell, 'War, Folklore and the Mystery of a Disappearing Book', *JSOT* 20 (1995): 113–119.

13. Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel*, 61.

If for ordinary readers the simple identification of Israel with Germany will have been enough, critical biblical scholars had been working for more than a generation to relate the biblical texts to the different phases of Israelite and Jewish history. Thus a further question arose: Which Israel is Germany? In most cases it seems that early Israel held the key. Well before the war we must remember the prominence of Julius Wellhausen (1844–1918)’s dictum that ‘war is what makes nations’ and his sense that Israel, not unlike Germany, was a nation forged in battle.<sup>14</sup> This idea was clearly still prominent during the war, when many German scholars wrote approvingly of what we might call ‘the manly vitality of the young nation Israel’, which aligns well with the recently united German *Volk*. Indeed, as Harold Washington pointed out some time ago, the comparison is almost explicit in Eissfeldt’s *Krieg und Bibel*:

The warlike virtues, of which all young and powerful peoples are proud, were also Israel’s fame: a longing for freedom, manly honor, bravery, and daring, patriotism and the capacity for self-sacrifice, a cunning and crafty intelligence. . . . It almost seems as if, with all the changes that the externals of warfare undergo – weapons, tactics, etc. – the ethical effects of war upon people remain the same: the same martial prowess and virtues shine forth from men and nations of various times.<sup>15</sup>

In this context, Gunkel’s focus on the royal psalms is striking, since he sees them as belonging to the earliest material in the Psalter, genuine relics from monarchic Israel. Despite his late dating of most of the psalms, with the victorious king the parallel with early Israel, or at least the early monarchy, still holds. Even when Gunkel discusses material he believes to be later, he describes the songs of Psalter as combining the best of the prophetic with the ‘thought of the older national religion, never entirely forgotten.’<sup>16</sup>

For most of the twentieth century, it was hardly controversial to assert that the psalms reflect the religious world of early Israel, or at least of the pre-exilic temple.<sup>17</sup> But this was not yet the case 100 years ago. The years 1914–1918 were a

14. Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 1st ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1894), 14–17; 2nd ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1895), 25–27; cf. Paul Michael Kurtz, ‘The Way of War: Wellhausen, Israel, and Bellicose Reiche’, *ZAW* 127, no. 1 (2015): 1–19.

15. Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel*, 24–25, translated by Harold C. Washington in his essay ‘Violence and the Construction of Gender in the Hebrew Bible: A New Historicist Approach’, *BibInt* 5 (1997): 324–63 (338).

16. Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, 46.

17. The transition is due in large part to the work of the Norwegian Sigmund Mowinckel in the 1920s and beyond. Although the winds of scholarship have been blowing back in the other direction to some extent in the past twenty years, for a robust defence of the pre-exilic date of many psalms, see John Day, ‘How Many Pre-exilic Psalms are There?’, in *In Search of Pre-exilic Israel*, ed. John Day, LHBOTS 406 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 225–50. C. L. Crouch notes that while the dating of psalms is extremely difficult, they nevertheless



point of transition, and scholars of the older generation had tended to date most of the psalms very late indeed, as products of the Hellenistic period.<sup>18</sup> According to the evolutionary schemes prominent at the time, this was a period when much of the vitality of Israel's religion had ossified under the influence of the Torah. But it is also the period of the Maccabean revolt against Hellenistic imperialism. Here again was a worthy parallel with Germany's current situation. Wolfgang Mommsen notes that amongst German intellectuals 'the assumption that war would be an ideal, and perhaps unavoidable means of revitalizing a national culture that had grown stagnant was widespread in the years leading up to 1914'.<sup>19</sup> The Maccabean wars offered a fine example of such a national revival in action, where biblical scholars could find clear parallels between their own period and the heroic past.

At the beginning of the century, Wellhausen had claimed that in the person of Judas Maccabaeus 'the Lord awoke again for [Israel] judge and saviour, as in previous times. Past days returned, and religion engendered patriotism'.<sup>20</sup> For wartime writers, Maccabean psalms were evidence of the heroism of the age, and Alfred Bertholet suggests that even the 'unsterbliche Lutherlied' itself, Psalm 46, may have its origin in the context of the 'world wars' created by Alexander the Great's campaigns.<sup>21</sup> Eissfeldt himself sees the Maccabean date as consonant with the emphasis on national victory he finds throughout the psalms: 'It is such belief in victory, founded on the righteousness of their cause, that inspired the Maccabees and enabled their great deeds and success'.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, it is worth noting that Eissfeldt saw in the warlike Maccabean period something of a return to the world of the 'young nation' Israel; the period 'distinguishes itself in many respects as a revival of the old age of Judges and of Kings', and 'what began as a war of religion became a war for national independence and freedom'.<sup>23</sup>

But the most compelling discussion comes in Delitzsch, who also produced the most explicitly propagandistic of the works I discuss in this study. Throughout his essay, he works from the assumption that more or less all the psalms provide evidence for the piety of the Maccabees. They belong to a time of war in which the Jewish people had to fight for its ideals against a world of enemies. Delitzsch here offers a remarkable reading of Psalm 110, which he sees as a kind of Maccabean recruiting song. His main interest is in the first part of v. 3, which he translates

provide an important resource for reconstructing the war ideology of pre-exilic Judah; see her *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History*, BZAW 407 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 65–80.

18. Gillingham, *Psalms through the Centuries*, 198.

19. Wolfgang J. Mommsen, 'German Artists, Writers and Intellectuals and the Meaning of War, 1914–1918', in *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War*, ed. John Horne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 21–38 (22).

20. Julius Wellhausen, *Israelitische und jüdische Geschichte*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Reimer, 1904), 259.

21. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 8.

22. Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel*, 64.

23. Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel*, 55, 57; cf. Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, 4.

idiosyncratically: ‘Dein Volk ist ganz Freiwilligkeit an deinem Heertage’. He means by this something like ‘your people is fully ready to volunteer on the day of your muster’, and he goes on to ask, ‘Could we find more suitable, more wonderful words to describe what we have experienced since August 2nd, and continue to experience?’<sup>24</sup> For Delitzsch, the ‘spirit of 1914’ is powerfully reinforced by what we might call the ‘spirit of 167’, and as the lecture goes on, he regularly makes comparisons between the two situations, emphasizing not only the heroic deeds of the Maccabees but also their piety and trust in God.

In fact, the Maccabean view of the Psalter may well have had rather more propagandistic purchase than the idea of early Israel. One of the most common themes of German propaganda in the early part of the war emphasized a highly nationalistic view of German *Kultur*. Wolfgang Mommsen comments that the German academic community ‘found little difficulty from the outset in justifying the war as an effort to defend German “culture” against the threat of what was considered western materialist, formalist “civilization”’.<sup>25</sup> The Maccabean war to defend their Jewish culture against aggression and assimilation could speak volumes in this context.

In Britain, too, it was natural to think of a parallel between the nation and God’s chosen people Israel. Such an identification had long been part of Britain’s national and then imperial self-understanding; from the Reformation period onwards, the concepts of election and covenant were a powerful resource for Protestants, and in both England and Scotland, it became common to think of the nation as a ‘chosen people’ in the same way as biblical Israel.<sup>26</sup> This idea continued to have currency as the British Empire emerged, and the psalms played their part, not least in Isaac Watts’ very popular collection of psalm paraphrases, *The Psalms of David*, published in 1719. In several places, the comparison is more or less explicit; thus, for example, in Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 47 we read:

In Israel stood his ancient throne  
He loved that chosen race  
But now he calls the world his own  
And heathens taste his grace.  
The British Islands are the Lord’s  
There Abraham’s God is known  
While powers and princes, shields and swords  
Submit before his throne.<sup>27</sup>

24. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 74–75.

25. Mommsen, ‘German Artists’, 28; cf. 29–31.

26. Cf. Anthony D. Smith, ‘Biblical Beliefs in the Shaping of Modern Nations’, *Nations and Nationalism* 21, no. 3 (2015): 403–22; Jo Carruthers, ‘Nationalism’, in *The Blackwell Companion to the Bible and Culture*, ed. John F. A. Sawyer (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 480–96.

27. Isaac Watts, *The Psalms of David: Imitated in the Language of the New Testament and apply’d to the Christian State and Worship* (London: n.p., 1719), 125.



In this psalm paraphrase, the God of Israel seems to have transferred his allegiance to Britain, and the conversion of 'heathens' is paralleled by the subjection of 'powers and princes'.<sup>28</sup> Two hundred years later, with the British Empire at its height, it was still possible to believe that Britain was the special beneficiary of divine providence. For wartime writers in Britain, as in Germany, the analogy between Britain and Israel still held. It was a staple of patriotic preaching in the early part of the war, but is present to a lesser extent in more scholarly publications.<sup>29</sup> The Scottish Presbyterian A. R. Howell, for example, in his 1918 *Expository Times* article 'The Rediscovery of the Psalms' makes much of them as 'Songs of the Nation' and claims that their communal nature, demonstrated by 'trustworthy students of the Hebrew Scriptures' chimes in well when 'the war has brought to all of us also a corporate sense not sufficiently realized, perhaps, in times of peace'.<sup>30</sup>

J. E. McFadyen, in his 1915 pamphlet, *The Bible and the War*, commends the Bible for its 'glowing sense of the importance and obligations of nationality' and even goes so far as to suggest that the Germans have rather more effectively learned the biblical 'lesson of the importance and solidarity of the State' than have the British.<sup>31</sup> His 'The Psalter and the Present Distress' (1917) strikes a similar tone. The psalms can help considerably in the current situation, since they model a school of patriotism for the young. The historical psalms, in particular, offer the kind of thrilling retelling of the nation's history which Britain could emulate. Moreover, the psalms emphasize the intimate connection between national prosperity and moral values. McFadyen extols the words of Ps 85:10–13, which 'set forth with singular beauty the ideal of a land in which the citizens are all kind and loyal to one another, and angels look down upon the lovely sight'.<sup>32</sup> A just community is not simply about economics, and the psalmist's distinction between the righteous and the wicked is about more than simply the division between the poor and the wealthy:

It is a distinction between those who care deeply and those who care nothing for the things that matter to the well-being of a nation; between those who are prepared to sacrifice life itself in defence of the things for which Israel stood,

28. John M. Hull, 'Isaac Watts and the Origins of British Imperial Theology', *International Congregational Journal* 4 (2005): 59–79.

29. For discussion of preaching texts in wartime, see Stuart Bell, *Faith in Conflict: The Impact of the Great War on the Faith of the People of Britain* (Solihull: Helion, 2017). Bell notes a significant increase in the number of sermons preached on Old Testament texts in the early months of the war.

30. A. R. Howell, 'The Re-Discovery of the Psalms', *ExpTim* 29, no. 12 (1918): 558–59.

31. John E. McFadyen, *The Bible and the War* (Stirling: Drummond's Tract Depot, 1915), 26–27.

32. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 375.

and those to whom ease and pleasure and power and money are the only things that matter.<sup>33</sup>

This is beginning to stray some distance from exegesis, and the psalmist's concerns blur rather easily into McFadyen's own particular brand of patriotism.

McFadyen does not give much attention to the date and composition of the Psalter in this article, but like his German colleagues, he draws attention to the presumed Maccabean context of the psalms:

Now, as then, we have the clashing of two cultures. The background of the later Psalms which we know as the Maccabean is the struggle of the Greek and the Hebrew, not very unlike the titanic struggle which is being waged today. Then the representatives of one culture were seeking to impose it by force upon the representatives of the other and the champions of the spiritual order resisted the encroachment even unto blood. With the 'high praises of God in the mouth and a two-edged sword in their hand' [a verse from Ps 149 that Delitzsch also quoted enthusiastically] they fought to the death, not to extend their culture over nations that resented it, but in defence of their own peculiar life. They did not fight for dominion, but for freedom to live their own life, to exercise their own religion, to preserve the type which had been handed down from the ancient days, and which had made them the distinctive people that they were.<sup>34</sup>

Here, Maccabean virtues remain remarkably similar to those that Delitzsch found; in both cases, they are fighting for the freedom to preserve a distinctive way of life.

It is nevertheless striking that, despite bombast like this, by comparison with the German sources, the nationalism is less strident. Indeed, McFadyen notes that many of the longer, historical psalms were told 'not, of course, to stimulate national pride, but to warn, instruct and inspire the people'; the Psalter reminds us that 'the shadow that falls across the national history is thrown by the obstinacy and the irresponsiveness of the nation to the divine voice, by its refusal to cleanse its life of the vices that degrade it, and it is for us not to repeat the folly of the past'.<sup>35</sup> McFadyen does not go into any more detail in his essay on the psalms, but in *The Bible and the War* he offers an analysis of the social ills which are afflicting Britain and even claims the war as a call for temperance.<sup>36</sup> Elsewhere, he and others offered readings of the prophets (especially Isaiah) that called Britain to account for its sins.

33. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 375.

34. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 247. On the Maccabean dating of the psalms, see e.g. R. H. Kennett, 'Psalms, Book of', *Encyclopaedia Britannica* 22 (1911): 535–39.

35. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 374.

36. McFadyen, *The Bible and the War*, 24–25.

Thus, G. Buchanan Gray (professor of Old Testament at Mansfield College, Oxford), in a 1918 article on Isaiah's Assyrian oracles, suggests that to equate England with Israel means that England can stand accused of the same neglect of social justice for which Isaiah condemned his own people. Moreover, Gray queries the easy analogy of the two nations, arguing that as a major world power England stands closer to the biblical Assyria than to the 'entirely negligible' Judah.<sup>37</sup>

One reason for a slightly less clear identification of the nation with Israel in Britain may have itself been a desire on the part of British scholars to distance themselves from the notion of a national God. This had considerable currency in Germany in the early part of the war and was widely mocked in Britain and France.<sup>38</sup> Salomon Samuel makes a powerful identification towards the end of his *Bibel und Heldentum* when he claims that 'a German god has revealed himself in holy war out of the words of the Bible.'<sup>39</sup> To be fair, however, other German writers were much more circumspect about the appropriateness of this idea. Rudolf Kittel, for example, is clearly uncomfortable about 'seeing God as the God of the Germans in a special sense and ourselves as the chosen people.'<sup>40</sup> He goes on, nevertheless, to suggest that the words of Psalms 33 and 124 express perfectly Germany's current experience of a God who is 'for us' and who 'brings the counsel of the nations to nothing'.

But Britain is not the only nation which British authors identify with Israel, especially when it comes to psalmic laments. Here it is 'poor little Belgium' that takes on the mantle of sorrowful Israel. In an anonymous *Times* article of August 1916, we read:

Even the wrath which many understood for the first time when Louvain was sacked was already interpreted, and it was a Psalm that gave us our prayer when the exiled Belgians with their pitiful stories came to our doors: 'when the Lord turned again the captivity of Zion.'<sup>41</sup>

It can only be this context that makes sense of McFadyen's inclusion of a section entitled 'The Place of Small Nations' in his study of the psalms. Here, he actually has rather little to say about the Psalter other than that it is the product of a small nation. But this itself matters. He concludes, 'It is striking and worth laying to heart to-day that the profoundest service to the world has been rendered by one

37. G. Buchanan Gray, 'Profane Nations', *ExpTim* 29, no. 6 (1918): 250–54; cf. also McFadyen, *The Bible and the War*, 20–26.

38. See, e.g. Gregory Moore, 'The Super-Hun and the Super-State: Allied Propaganda and German Philosophy during the First World War', *German Life and Letters* 54, no. 4 (2001): 310–30 (313–14).

39. Samuel, *Bibel und Heldentum*, 73.

40. Kittel, *Das Alte Testament*, 40.

41. Anon., 'The Bible in War-Time: New Light in Old Words', *The Times* (19 August 1916): 9.

of the smallest of peoples'.<sup>42</sup> This point is a little ambiguous. It may, of course, refer to Israel, but in the context of First World War Britain it must also evoke tiny but heroic Belgium. Protection of the rights of small nations – not only Belgium but also notably Serbia – was a prominent part of British justification for going to war.<sup>43</sup> As with the German examples, the themes of propaganda weave themselves all too easily into an account of the Psalms.

### *The Rediscovery of the Enemy*

One of the most prominent features of the Psalter is the presence of enemies, both personal and national. The outbreak of war clearly shocked scholars across the board into a new awareness of the relevance of these enemies to the situations they and their nations were facing. A very striking passage in Bertholet's *Altes Testament und Kriegsfrömmigkeit* discusses the timeliness of the Old Testament message: 'I only need to indicate one word, that runs through great parts of the OT as a key word, the word "enemy"'.<sup>44</sup> For examples, of course, he turns to the psalms. In the past, even Psalm 23 could not fully warm the heart:

'You lay a table for me in front of my enemies': here was now a foreign tone, that did not echo in the heart, and we felt ourselves chilled. And today! 'Oh Lord how many are my foes round about me, and how many rise against me!'<sup>45</sup>

Here, Delitzsch is again a rich resource, as he uses psalmic models to run through a full repertoire of images of the enemy. A great deal of his lecture is taken up with the question of the enemy, and the comparison of the psalmist's opponents with the three great powers ranged against Germany: the Russians, the French and especially the greedy and perfidious English. Delitzsch peppers his writing with anecdotes, mostly to exemplify the worst features of the English character, which can then be found also in the psalmist's enemies. He tells a story about how three years after the unification of Germany he was working quietly in the British Museum, when Sir Henry Rawlinson (1810–1895), a trustee of the museum, banged his fist on the desk and exclaimed, 'You Germans are taking everything

42. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 306.

43. David Monger sees this as part of a British narrative that saw the war as a defence of 'civilization': 'Belgium and Serbia served . . . as heroic victims (or martyrs) of enemy aggression, providing important examples of the "little nations" or "small states" for which the "great civilised powers" fought, and were usefully employed to appeal to the sympathy of Britain's own "small" sub-nations.' David Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda in First World War Britain: The National War Aims Committee and Civilian Morale* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), 141.

44. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 23.

45. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 24 (Pss 23:5; 3:1).

from us!’<sup>46</sup> Delitzsch’s basic narrative is that the British, threatened by the rise of German power, will do anything and everything to hold on to their imperial pre-eminence. They have found it so profitable to bear the ‘white man’s burden’ alone that they will brook no competition but dream of an ‘ever Greater Britain.’<sup>47</sup> In envy, they have therefore gathered together a horde of the wildest nations of the world to assault Germany. England’s deepest desires are no less than an echo of Israel’s enemies in Psalm 83: ‘We will exterminate them as a people.’ And in this psalm we see Israel beset by ten named enemies, which Delitzsch finds most evocative of the Maccabean period, when the Jewish people was surrounded by enemies on all sides, as are the Germans today.<sup>48</sup> This notion of ‘encirclement’ by enemies was another key aspect of German propaganda of the time.<sup>49</sup>

A focus on the enemy’s faults might also allow scholars to emphasize the justice of their own cause. Delitzsch highlights three themes in the psalms: righteousness, faithfulness and mercy. In each case, German virtue is to be contrasted with allied vice. Psalm 5:7 proclaims that ‘God abhors the men of bloodshed and deceit’, and the three world powers that oppose Germany, led by the English, have undermined Europe and Asia with a flood of spies and divided the world with ‘unprecedented brutality and dishonour.’<sup>50</sup> In contrast, more than any world leader the German Kaiser could claim with the psalmist that ‘I am peace’ (Ps 120:7), and German soldiers, following the example of the Maccabees, ‘know that they go into battle for the God of righteousness himself against the men of bloodshed and deceit, to destroy them “in the name of the Lord” (Ps 118.10 ff)’<sup>51</sup>

The psalms also advocate mercy, a quality which is hard to maintain in wartime but is much more typical of ‘our brave soldiers’, who always attempt to do better

46. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 70. As it happens, Rawlinson’s son Henry (1864–1925) was in the autumn of 1914 one of the British Expeditionary Force’s commanders on the Western Front.

47. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 72.

48. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 73–74. Rowland Prothero recounts a very similar use of Psalm 83 by President Kruger during the Boer War, in Prothero’s often-reprinted volume, *The Psalms in Human Life*, new ed. (London: John Murray, 1904), 365–67.

49. For a thorough discussion of this propaganda, see Matthew Stibbe, *German Anglophobia and the Great War, 1914–1918*, Studies in the Social and Cultural History of Modern Warfare 11 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). It is striking that the notion of Germany’s encirclement is also present in a discussion of Psalm 83 in Eckstein’s *Der Völkerring und das Alte Testament*, 12–13. Echoing Delitzsch, he recounts a letter from Bismarck to his wife in which the statesman recalls being consoled by Psalm 27: ‘If Prince Bismarck had experienced the world war of our time, he need only have edified himself by reading Psalm 83, in which we need only replace the old names with the new to bring ourselves right up to date.’

50. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 76.

51. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 77. ‘I am peace’ is Delitzsch’s own literal translation of the Hebrew אֲנִי-שְׁלוֹם, more normally translated ‘I am for peace.’

than ‘eye for eye and tooth for tooth’. On the other hand, the English claim to be merciful is a mockery. Delitzsch is horrified by a report that Lloyd George has claimed the role of Good Samaritan for Britain (presumably as defender of ‘little Belgium’).<sup>52</sup> He expostulates: ‘England, the land of the mission to the heathen, that has reduced its wards to slaves and slaughtered them as cannon-fodder – the Good Samaritan. Is it not blasphemy?’ He goes on to mock England’s ‘holy war’ against Germany, which is carried out by ‘a pack of heathens and idolaters and devil-worshippers: wild hordes with poisoned throwing knives, which they use for hunting tigers at home! Even the patience of Jesus would be tried by these hateful acts.’<sup>53</sup> The prominence of French and British colonial troops on the Western Front provoked a rash of frankly racist propaganda, in which Britain especially was cast as ‘betrayers’ of the white race. Matthew Stibbe notes how racist rhetoric, often accompanied by lurid cartoons, ‘became a standard feature of German wartime propaganda, forming part of a broader continuum of anti-Western propaganda which alleged that Britain and France, far from protecting western Europe from the “invading hun” were actually engaged in acts of savagery and cultural vandalism.’<sup>54</sup> Delitzsch here perfectly exemplifies this trend.

It becomes clear that in many respects the psalms are only a rough framework on which Delitzsch hangs his polemic against the enemies of Germany. Another fine example is when he notes that the war has given a new prominence to lies, in which England has developed a record as liar that is ‘even greater than that of the Father of Lies, the Devil himself’. But the psalmist places liars and slanderers under the judgment of God: ‘The Lord destroys liars’ (Ps 5:7), and ‘the tongue-man, i.e.

52. He is most likely referring to these words, taken from a speech Lloyd George made at the City Temple on 10 November 1914: ‘There must be a revised version of one passage of the Scriptures in Belgium. It must be revised for Belgian use and read “Who is thy neighbour? Thy neighbour is he who falls on thee like a thief, strips thee and wounds thee, and leaves thee half dead”. That is Germany’s version of duty to a neighbour. If Britain, after passing her word, had left that little country bleeding on the roadside, without attempting to rescue her, the infamy of Germany would have been shared by the British Empire’. See David Lloyd George, *Through Terror to Triumph: Speeches and Pronouncements of the Right Hon. David Lloyd George, M.P., Since the Beginning of the War*, arranged by F. L. Stevenson (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1915), 53–54. For a provocative discussion of the possibility that a ‘Good Samaritan Complex’ is typical of the way that more recent British politicians have used the Bible, see James Crossley, ‘We Don’t Do Babylon: Erin Runions in English Political Discourse’, *The Bible and Critical Theory* 11, no. 2 (2015): 61–76 (esp. 69–74).

53. Delitzsch, ‘Psalmworte’, 79–80. Rudolf Kittel makes very similar moves as he defends German soldiers’ use of the fearsome saw-toothed bayonet: ‘Such hard and unaccustomed weapons must be allowed to defend the homeland and its highest goods from wild hordes: black, brown, yellow, who have no idea of international law or of culture, and against those who without a thought have sent these half-beasts against our best sons – sometimes even the sons of their own teachers!’ (*Das Alte Testament*, 8).

54. Stibbe, *German Anglophobia*, 42.



the slanderer, will not persist on the earth' (Ps 140:12). Of course, these comments are supplemented by occasions on which English people have lied in front of Delitzsch about Germany's Middle Eastern ambitions, not to mention the work of the 'Lie-bureaus' that make up the English civil service.<sup>55</sup> Again, it is possible to find connections between Delitzsch's psalm interpretation and themes prominent in German propaganda. Matthew Stibbe, in his study of German Anglophobia during the First World War, notes, for example, a rash of pamphlets from late 1914 claiming that England's aim was to destroy Germany, or that England is 'perfidious Albion', 'mercenary and hypocritical', or that the multi-ethnic and multireligious composition of the British and French imperial armies amounted to a betrayal of the white race.<sup>56</sup> All of these themes are here in Delitzsch.

British writers also found plenty to work with in the psalmist's array of enemies. They, too, believed that their nation was engaged in a righteous struggle against wicked forces, and they drew on a similar range of texts. But there are certainly differences in the image of the enemy that emerges, and these again we need to see in the context of the propaganda war. Perceived German atrocities in France and especially Belgium at the beginning of the war had done much to set the tone. To these were added a variety of attacks on helpless targets: the bombardment of seaside towns, air raids on London and the South East, U-boat sinkings of hospital ships and civilian vessels like the *Lusitania*.<sup>57</sup>

Perhaps the best-known British Old Testament scholar of the period was Sir George Adam Smith (1856–1942), by this time principal of the University of Aberdeen. From April to July 1918, Smith undertook a lecture tour of the United States to enlist support for the war effort, addressing 127 meetings and covering some 22,000 miles.<sup>58</sup> Two of his published addresses from the tour take psalm texts as their starting points, and in both addresses Smith highlights German barbarism and brutality. Faith in the God of love revealed in the psalms can carry Britain and America through the war, not least because divine justice will not allow German criminality to prevail:

The arrogance of arms and the criminal statesmanship which provoked it, and the atrocious cruelties with which it has been conducted by our enemies, especially in Belgium, Armenia and on the seas – *As the Lord reigneth* [Pss 93:1; 97:1; 99:1] these cannot triumph. *As righteousness and justice are the foundations of his throne* [Ps 89:14], such forces are destined to fail.<sup>59</sup>

55. Delitzsch, 'Psalmworte', 82.

56. Stibbe, *German Anglophobia*, 22.

57. On the way in which these events were reported in the British press, and especially the *Daily Mail*, see Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 50–53.

58. George Adam Smith, *Our Common Conscience: Addresses Delivered in America During the Great War* (New York: Doran, 1919), vii–viii.

59. Smith, *Our Common Conscience*, 184, cf. 212–14.

The focus on ‘atrocious cruelties’ here is typical of British propaganda. It is not there simply to shock and horrify, but also to demonstrate a deeper malaise within German society and culture.<sup>60</sup>

In another of his addresses on the psalms, most often delivered to American soldiers, he reflects on the lines, ‘Hope in God; for I shall yet praise Him, Who is the health of my countenance and my God’ (Pss 42:5–6, 11; 43:5). This is an expression of courage in adversity and well matches the experience of the British people, whose faith was ‘shocked by the most sudden and treacherous assault on the peace of the world, the most impious conspiracy between brute force and arrogant intellect which history records’; he goes on: ‘And then, and since then, they have had constant experience of an incredible faithlessness and cruelty on the part of a people calling itself Christian and boasting the superiority of its culture.’<sup>61</sup> When later in the address he improvises on the text ‘Judge me, O God, and plead my cause against an ungodly nation!’ (Ps 43:1), it is very clear who he believes that ungodly nation to be, since German policy has been characterized by ‘a general defiance of the moral law, a reckless, unlimited design on the freedom and rights of all other peoples’. Like Delitzsch, Smith uses the psalmic language as a peg on which to hang his critique of the enemy and, like his German colleague, that critique has much in common with the typical themes of propaganda.

McFadyen also has plenty to say about enemies, and, by contrast with Smith, he is more concerned with the interpretation of the biblical texts themselves. He remarks that ‘throughout the whole length of the Psalter and even in the briefest and gentlest Psalms like the twenty-third, you can hear [the enemies’] stealthy tread and listen to their venomous words.’<sup>62</sup> Like Delitzsch, he quotes Psalm 83 with its array of foes, although there is no hint here of ‘encirclement’. Instead, we are reminded in more general terms of ‘the muster to-day from the ends of the earth’, and where German scholars used the psalms to identify the treachery and deceitfulness of the enemies, McFadyen emphasizes their barbarity, moving on to draw in Psalm 2:

To-day too, and on a more terrific scale we have seen ‘kings of the earth conspiring, And rulers consulting together’ to snap the bonds and fling away the cords that bind human society together. To-day, as then, we have the policy of frightfulness. To-day, as then, we have baby-killers, and today, as then, there is the thirst for reprisals.<sup>63</sup>

Howell also employs the term ‘frightfulness’ in discussing the psalmist’s enemies, even putting it in inverted commas: ‘We can appreciate still the white heat of

60. Cf. Monger, *Patriotism and Propaganda*, 120–27.

61. Smith, *Our Common Conscience*, 210–11.

62. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter’, 246.

63. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter’, 247.

indignation and loathing when we recoil with horror from the “frightfulness” of a ruthless and unscrupulous enemy.<sup>64</sup> The terms ‘frightfulness’ and ‘baby-killers’ belong very clearly to the world of British propaganda. ‘Frightfulness’ became shorthand for German atrocities against civilians, while ‘baby-killers’ was a term of abuse levelled at Germans after the naval bombardment of Scarborough and Hartlepool in December 1914 and later during the bombing raids on London and the South East.<sup>65</sup> On the other hand, when McFadyen writes of ‘reprisals’, he is most likely critical of his British compatriots who called for retaliatory raids against German civilians.

For all his awareness that Britons are not wholly blameless in the current conflict, McFadyen still draws explicit attention to the enemy’s atrocities, especially the destruction of churches:

For nothing so stirred the Jew to sorrowful indignation as the desecration of the holy and beautiful house in which they had worshipped the God of their fathers. . . . With the fate of Rheims and many other ancient and famous churches before our eyes, we can enter into the sorrowful soul of the Psalmist who lamented: ‘Like lions Thine enemies roared through Thy house.’<sup>66</sup>

In British wartime propaganda, the destruction of churches was key evidence for German barbarism, and images of the ruins of Rheims Cathedral were widely circulated, as well as of numerous other churches and the famous library at Leuven.

### *A Curse Too Far? A Psalm Too Jewish?*

An aspect of the Psalter intimately connected with the presence of the enemy is imprecation or curse, as the psalmist asks God to destroy his enemies. The most famous and difficult example must be Psalm 137, which opens with the achingly beautiful ‘By the waters of Babylon we sat down and there we wept’, continues with a vow never to forget Jerusalem and ends with the chilling plea: ‘Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!’

Unsurprisingly, both the problem of imprecation in general and some of the individual imprecatory psalms were discussed widely during 1914–1918. In Britain, the most startling case is the furore that arose in the popular press in the summer of 1917, when London was suffering a wave of German air raids and there were widespread calls for so-called ‘reprisals’ against German civilians. In

64. Howell, ‘The Re-Discovery of the Psalms’, 35.

65. On the terms ‘frightfulness’ and ‘baby-killers’ during the First World War, see Lynda Mugglestone, ‘Alien Enemies: The Politics of Being Frightful’, *English Words in War-Time* (16 March 2015), <https://wordsinwartime.wordpress.com/2015/03/16/alien-enemies-the-politics-of-being-frightful/>.

66. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter’, 248.

this highly charged situation, the Convocation of Canterbury, one of the Church of England's highest legislative assemblies, voted to bring in a new version of the Psalter, in which many of the imprecatory verses of the psalms, including the offending part of Psalm 137 and the whole of Psalm 58, would be omitted as inappropriate for Christian worship. This proposal produced a flood of scorn and outrage in the popular right-wing press, in which the church leadership was charged with unpatriotic 'namby-pambyism' and the imprecatory psalms' prayers invoked as a justification for reprisals.<sup>67</sup>

While Convocation's timing was spectacularly poor, its decision to do away with imprecation only codified a view that is very widely represented in the literature of the period on Psalms. A good example would be the commentary on Psalms by A. F. Kirkpatrick, dean of Ely Cathedral, which contains an extensive discussion of imprecatory psalms and concludes that they can never be used on the lips of Christians.<sup>68</sup> Kirkpatrick is an instructive example, not least because he was the only serious Hebraist on the committee that advised the archbishop and also because the commentary came out in the series 'The Cambridge Bible Commentary for Schools and Colleges', and was therefore aimed at a wide and perhaps impressionable audience.

Yet, among biblical scholars writing in wartime, McFadyen claims that the war has brought people closer to these awful prayers:

We used to shudder at the imprecatory psalms, and let us hope we shudder still . . . but we, who have seen in these latter days what antecedently we could never have believed of the horrors and the inhumanities of war, are able to understand these psalms as they have seldom been understood since the flaming words leaped from torn and bleeding hearts. We could not take their dreadful prayers upon our lips; we could not ask God to feast our eyes upon our foes, or to grant that our feet might be washed in the blood of the wicked. But too well we understand to-day the mood from which such prayer can spring.<sup>69</sup>

In a comment that must make a sideswipe at Ernst Lissauer's notorious 'Hassgesang gegen England', McFadyen emphasizes that these 'hymns of hate' do not reflect mere national vindictiveness and spite but are an attempt to reinstate the moral order of the world.<sup>70</sup> Similarly, Howell argues that their underlying thought is about the sovereignty of God, which is masked by their antiquity: 'We recall the rude and violent character of the age in which these utterances were spoken and

67. For a full discussion of the episode, see Andrew Mein, 'Bishops, Baby-Killers and Broken Teeth: Psalm 58 and the Air War', *JBR* 4, no. 2 (2017): 207–23.

68. A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms: With Introduction and Notes* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1902).

69. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 248.

70. McFadyen, 'The Psalter', 248. On Lissauer, see Brian Murdoch, *Fighting Songs and Warring Words: Popular Lyrics of the Two World Wars* (London: Routledge, 1990).

we can eliminate their barbarian and unchristian spirit.<sup>71</sup> McFadyen even goes so far as to offer an extraordinary misreading of Ps 137:8, when he suggests that ‘the men whom the Psalmists hate and curse’ are cursed not as Israel’s but as God’s own enemies. Such enemies are ‘those who would dash children against rocks,’ he says, turning the logic of the psalm on its head!<sup>72</sup>

Turning back towards German scholarship, we can also find some discussion of the imprecatory psalms, and above all Psalm 137. Bertholet immediately makes it contemporary by identifying the exiled Judeans as ‘prisoners of war,’ while Gunkel sees it as an understandable example of the enduring pride and heroism of a people suffering from foreign oppression.<sup>73</sup> But, as in Britain, there is also a perceived problem with using quite such violent words in a modern (and especially Christian) context. Rudolf Kittel, in his 1914 Psalms commentary, acknowledges the poetic greatness of the psalm but shrinks back from seeing in it a moral example.<sup>74</sup> We see traces of this negative evaluation in the wartime writing under examination. Bertholet, like many, is working with a developmental model whereby the primitive early form of Israelite religion is replaced by a more national and universal prophetic religion. Although the Old Testament helps us make sense of the war, it is in part because the war throws us hundreds of years back into the past, to more primitive instincts.

I think especially of the certain utterances against enemies, with which the Psalter above all resounds, outbreaks of measureless fury, implacable hatred and relentless vengeance. To take words like [those of Ps 137:8] simply as a solution, is to cover something unchristian with a pious appearance.<sup>75</sup>

For Bertholet, then, sometimes the Old Testament has a different spirit from Christianity, which arises from its long development, and we must therefore be a little careful about what we take from it to support our *Kriegsfrömmigkeit*.

Eissfeldt too discusses the last verse of Psalm 137. It is an utterance of unbridled chauvinism, which belongs to the ‘unpleasant aspects of this epoch of Jewish history,’ but he goes on to mount something of a defence of the psalm. He warns his fellow countryfolk not to condemn this too quickly: ‘It is really nothing more than an exaggerated nationalism, admittedly exaggerated to a degree that it has become a caricature of patriotic feeling.’ Other peoples have experienced the same, from the Greeks and Romans to the present day, and he admits that ‘our days as well, in which national feeling is developed to a great degree amongst the nations of culture, can tell of an exaggeration of national feeling.’ If we excuse the Greeks

71. Howell, ‘The Re-Discovery of the Psalms’, 35.

72. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter’, 248.

73. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 25; Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, 5–6.

74. Rudolf Kittel, *Die Psalmen*, KAT 13 (Leipzig: Deichert, 1914), 467.

75. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 47–48.

and Romans for this, we should also be fair to the Jews (and by implication, 'to ourselves').<sup>76</sup>

This issue of the Jewishness or chauvinism of Psalm 137 also raises a final issue worth attention that is very typical of German biblical scholars' interventions during the war. The question, bluntly put, is, 'Is the Bible strong enough for the heroic German people?' That it is so is the implicit assumption behind our scholars' praise of the great *Lutherpsalm* as a kind of German national anthem. But one of the agendas we see quite explicitly in German writing on the Bible and the war is the attempt to defend it against its *völkisch*-nationalist detractors.

Bertholet names the problem. Surely, he suggests, when we read the Bible we think of the psalmist's 'quiet in the land'. He quotes the statesman Walther Rathenau's harsh judgment of the psalms as 'those songs of the Hebrews, overwhelmed by the pathos of fear and incantation' and goes on to note that its explicit commendation of the physically weak made the biblical literature 'so unsympathetic to a certain Nietzsche'. He even received a letter from someone who claims that 'the spirit of the Old Testament is a spirit of weakness and slavery; the spirit of the German race stands in contradiction to it, and especially the German spirit of our time'.<sup>77</sup> The purpose of his whole volume is to offer a counterblast to these kinds of argument. Bertholet's piling up of these opposing views at the beginning of his work is, of course, the rhetorical springboard for him to demonstrate in the following pages that the Old Testament is more than adequate to the needs of German nation at war. At the end of his pamphlet, he returns to the psalms, reminding his hearers how the psalmic literature was redolent of the Bible's commendation of the weak. 'But', he goes on to say, 'the reality is that the Psalm literature and the Old Testament has a special relationship with *Kriegsfrömmigkeit*'.<sup>78</sup>

Jewish authors also engaged with this problem in their wartime writings on the Bible. Indeed, one essay in particular, by the Prague rabbi Isidor Hirsch, takes the psalms as its main focus and deals centrally with questions about the violence and vengefulness of the Jewish God. The essay, entitled *Die Kriegspsalmen und die jüdische Volksseele*, begins in very good heart about the positive effect the war is having on Jewish-Christian relations and the Bible's central role in this. Hirsch's hope is that amongst the various transformations for the better that the war will bring about is a re-evaluation of 'much-misunderstood Judaism and the much-vilified people of Israel'.<sup>79</sup> He is encouraged that the war has enabled a more accurate and positive evaluation of the Bible, the evidence for this is there in the work of German professoriate and their radical about-turn on the value of the Old Testament since the war began.

76. Eissfeldt, *Krieg und Bibel*, 71–72.

77. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 6.

78. Bertholet, *Altes Testament*, 47.

79. Isidor Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen und die jüdische Volksseele: Vortrag* (Frankfurt: Kauffmann, 1916), 1.



Hirsch had read Delitzsch's 'Psalmworte' with obvious relish and reports that this great enemy of the Bible, infamous from the Bibel-Babel controversy of the first years of the century, has now changed his tune.<sup>80</sup> Previously Delitzsch was one of a host of scholars who denounced the angry, vengeful and chauvinistic God of the Jews, but now it appears he has discovered that the psalms are the greatest poetry the ancient world produced, and the German people agree, if its enthusiasm for 'Ein Feste Burg' is anything to go by.

At a stroke, and as a result of the war, the 'Lord Sabaoth', who until recently was mocked and belittled as a dark, bloodthirsty, blood- and ruin-bringing 'war God', as a dreadful spawn of Semitic blood and the misanthropic Jewish national soul, has won grace and favour 'as the Lord of the earthly hosts' in the eyes of Christian biblical researchers. Even Delitzsch honours the truth that this 'Lord Sabaoth' is a holy God, whose attributes of righteousness, trustworthiness and mercy enlighten us from the Psalter.<sup>81</sup>

Hirsch commends these sentiments as worthy of the soul of a professor and he very much hopes that they will outlast the war.

Nevertheless, in his enthusiasm for the war psalms, Hirsch is aware that he has to tread a fine line between an emphasis on 'Jewish revenge' which was so much part of the anti-Semitic discourse of men like Houston Stewart Chamberlain and a proper pride in the close relationship of war and religion in the psalms. He shies away from the commendation of Ps 137:8 and comes up with an intriguing solution. Since this psalm originated in Babylonian exile, it actually reflects the disproportionate violence of Babylonian warfare that we read of in Assyriological sources. We do not see here the 'eye for an eye' justice of Jewish warfare. Hirsch argues strongly that it is a belief in God's justice that motivates the psalmist's imprecations. He distances this sense of justice from the kind of senseless fury we see in modern hate poems like Lissauer's 'Hassgesang'.<sup>82</sup> And by contrast to Wellhausen and his ilk, Hirsch also sees no religious regression but actually moral progress as we move from the more primitive theology of Davidic psalms to a higher attitude in psalms like Psalm 44, which he dates to the Maccabean period.<sup>83</sup>

80. Christian Wiese reports how at the time of Delitzsch's lectures, the Jewish community perceived this as an 'unprecedented denigration of Jewish traditions'; Christian Wiese, *Challenging Colonial Discourse: Jewish Studies and Protestant Theology in Wilhelmine Germany* (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 232.

81. Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen*, 4.

82. Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen*, 13. There is a contrast here with Adolf Eckstein, who approvingly describes Lissauer's poem as analogous to the Song of Deborah in Judges (*Der Völkerkrieg*, 9).

83. Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen*, 12–13.

His conclusion is uncompromising. In times like these, when states and nations like Germany and Austria are forced into a war against evil and malicious enemies, they ‘must grasp the enemy not with the kid gloves of Christian love for enemies, but with the iron fist of the Jewish ideal of righteousness.’<sup>84</sup> The Jewish national soul, then, can provide the backbone for German and Austrian victory that is lacking in Christian theology.

### *Concluding Reflections*

Commentators on the Psalter have long noted the ‘timelessness’ of its themes, which enable this book to speak to generation after generation. During the First World War, biblical scholars on both sides of the conflict tried to present that relevance to their readers and hearers. Questions of national victory and defeat, of enmity and hatred, of despair and hope were very much at the front of people’s minds, and the poetry of the psalms could connect quite directly to their experience. While each of the authors I have discussed has a different emphasis and choice of texts, they reflect most often on those psalms that deal explicitly with war and enmity. There is much less focus on sorrow and lament. Scholars pay a degree of lip service to the fact that the psalms express pain and grief. McFadyen, for example, notes that ‘the despondency and sorrow which crush so many a heart to-day had already been felt and voiced by the singers of the olden time.’<sup>85</sup> But his larger point is that, despite this, the dominant tone of the Psalter is one of confidence in God’s purpose, and even joy. Even Gunkel has relatively little to say about his most characteristic form of lament, beyond recognizing that the authors of lament and thanksgiving psalms display a quieter form of heroism in their non-military struggles.<sup>86</sup>

The idea of the Psalter as a national resource for Israel (and hence for modern readers) clearly had a strong grip on the scholarly imagination, and the examples I have discussed show how easily biblical exegesis could be deployed to serve the war effort. Both Britain and Germany were fundamentally Protestant nations with a high degree of biblical literacy, and it was not difficult for scholars to draw effective analogies with the Israel of the psalms. Moreover, to a greater or lesser extent, all of these authors play out the typical tropes of wartime propaganda. On the German side, we see the notion of ‘encirclement’ and of the defence of *Kultur* against a degenerate ‘civilization’, a racist demonization of colonial troops and a fierce hatred of ‘perfidious Albion’. British authors use the psalms to rally their readers to the defence of Western civilization against an arrogant and barbarous *Kultur*, the need to respond to German atrocities, and the importance of small

84. Hirsch, *Die Kriegspsalmen*, 24.

85. McFadyen, ‘The Psalter’, 246.

86. Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, 19.

nations. These propagandistic themes are present not only in sermons and pamphlets published at the outset of the war, but also in material from 1916, 1917 and 1918.

While some of the material involved a rather crass application of the words of the psalms to current concerns (Friedrich Delitzsch is perhaps the worst offender here), scholars also clearly wanted to bring their professional expertise to bear. Scholarly conclusions around things like early or late dating could be instrumentalized to suit the needs of the moment. The crisis looks to have provoked scholars to bring to the surface some of the political and ideological commitments that underpinned their work more broadly. The close relationship between nineteenth-century nationalist imperialism and the reconstruction of Israel's history that this reveals is not always a very pretty sight and prompts us to ask how far such assumptions continue to underlie our scholarly work. But the war also provoked fresh emphases and fresh readings of texts. Gordon Mitchell has helpfully suggested that for Gunkel, the 'contemporary experience of warfare' and a concern for real history replaced folklore and fantasy as guiding ideas.<sup>87</sup> He certainly moved a long way from the following statement about Psalm 137, made in 1903: 'We observe as strange not only the passion of patriotism, but even more the peculiarly close relation between religion and nationality'.<sup>88</sup> The Psalter, and with it the Old Testament as a whole, is now nothing if not a patriotic book. There is certainly a sense among all of the writers, whether German or British, that the war has provided a new commonality of experience and feeling with the world of ancient Israel, which grants new insights into the material.

It is not an accident that I have given more space to German sources than to British. There is simply more published material by German scholars that directly addresses the relationship between the Bible and the war. The reasons for this may in part be due to the greater number of university theology departments (and hence of Old Testament professors) in Germany, but it also probably has to do with the closer relationship between the universities and the state that characterized German academia, as well as the greater militarization of German culture in the years leading up to the war.<sup>89</sup> The contribution of German and Austrian Jewish scholars raises particular questions about the place of Old Testament studies within the rise of German anti-Semitism. It is very striking, given what comes after 1918, that during this war, biblical Israel remains an effective image for the German people. We are far from the Nazi rejection of the Old Testament of the 1930s. But I must clarify that it is *ancient Israel* rather than any form of ancient or modern Judaism that is the point of comparison. Christian scholars shared a developmental model that saw little in common between the two. Thus, Gunkel

87. Mitchell, 'War, Folklore', 116–17.

88. Hermann Gunkel, 'Psalm 137: An Interpretation', *The Biblical World* 22 (1903): 290–293 (293).

89. Mommsen, 'German Artists', 28.

is at pains to emphasize 'that early Israel with its proud love of freedom is sharply different in character from later enslaved and humbled Judaism', where religion trumped patriotism and love of peace might all too easily slip into cowardice.<sup>90</sup> The hopes of figures like Samuel, Hirsch and Eckstein that the war might make the Bible a lasting source of unity between Jews and Christians could only founder on the rock of a historical theory that divorced real Jews from biblical Israel.

90. Gunkel, *Israelitisches Heldentum*, 22.